

JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION
OF VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2019

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,
in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny
Isakson and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
presiding.

Senators Present: Isakson, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds,
Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Tester, Brown, Blumenthal,
Hirono, Manchin, and Sinema.

Representatives Present: Takano, Brownley, Lamb,
Levin, Rose, Brindisi, Cisneros, Lee, Underwood, Cunningham,
Pappas, Allred, Peterson, Roe, Radewagen, Bost, Bergman, and
Banks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

Chairman Isakson. I call this meeting of the Senate
and House Veterans' Affairs Committees together and welcome
our VSOs here today. Veterans of Foreign Wars is a great
organization. They have a beautiful building right down the

1 street. They do a great job on behalf of veterans from all
2 wars overseas and do a great job working with us, which we
3 appreciate a lot.

4 I know Tester is not here--oh, there he is. You lost
5 some weight. I did not recognize you. You are looking
6 good, as always. We are happy to have you--well, you did
7 not come to listen to us. We came to listen to you.

8 But as Chairman of the Senate Committee I want to tell
9 you how proud I am of what we have been able to do on that
10 Committee in terms of the Mission Act, accountability, and
11 the many things we have done improving the appeals process
12 and speeding things up.

13 We have a VA that can work for you. We are going to
14 ask you to be our partner this year. If you have a problem
15 with the VA, call us. Do not just call to complain. Call
16 to tell us what the problem was and help us solve the
17 problem. If we have got somebody at the VA that is a
18 problem we will get that corrected. If you are being a
19 problem, we will get that corrected.

20 We need to be a team. And the reason I said that is
21 important. We need to be a team. We cannot make it
22 everything you want it to be. We can make it the best we
23 can make it if we work together. But we spend time flaming
24 folks and talking about how somebody could have done
25 something better, and then we do not do anything productive.

1 So I am asking you to help us with that. I have told
2 all the chairman of all the committees and all the members
3 of the Senate I want them to talk to their LA and their
4 staff that do veterans' appeals and veterans' calls and
5 veterans' cases. Let me know when they have a good
6 experience. Let me know when they have a bad experience,
7 and let me know when they have a suggestion that would make
8 the experience for everybody better.

9 Our job, the next two years, is to make it work right.
10 It is not to introduce some other bill that is supposed to
11 fix something. The veterans have got more money, more
12 authority, more statutory changes, more of what you wanted
13 them to ever invest--not because of me, not because of Jon,
14 but because all of us work together. We are a team. We
15 want you to be on our team too, because in the end what we
16 all do together is a lot more than what we ever do
17 separately.

18 So I just want to thank you for everything that you
19 have done. I want to take one liberal license. Would all
20 the VFW members from Georgia please stand? Go Dogs.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Isakson. That was a little liberal license.

23 It is now my pleasure to introduce my Ranking Member
24 and a great friend of mine from Montana, Jon Tester.

25 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

1 Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Johnny, and we all
2 appreciate your leadership and what you have done as well as
3 the House side of things and the whole bipartisan, bicameral
4 working together. But Mr. Lawrence, thank you for being
5 here. I appreciate what you do. I appreciate your
6 leadership team and it is good to see you here today.

7 Is my crew from Montana here? Stand up. All right.
8 Thanks, guys.

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Tester. We have got some good folks in
11 Montana, I will tell you that, Commander Lawrence. As I
12 said before, and as Johnny just said, we are going to take
13 our cues from you. You know better than anyone how the VA
14 is performing across the country, what improvements need to
15 be made on behalf of veterans and their families, and
16 listening to veterans should not be a courtesy from the VA.
17 It should be mandatory. That is why we need to hear your
18 view on whether the VA is doing enough to accept
19 unacceptable rate of veteran suicides or provide just to
20 veterans exposed to toxins during their service, whether it
21 is Agent Orange or burn pits, or to address gender
22 disparities within the VA to provide more equitable
23 treatment of our women veterans, or to ensure all veterans
24 have access to timely and high-quality health care, whether
25 they live in Big Sandy, Montana, or Atlanta, Georgia.

1 We need to know whether the VFW believes that
2 implementation of the Mission Act, the largest overhaul of
3 veterans' health care in a generation, is being carried out
4 as Congress intended and as veterans deserve. There is very
5 little concern. I hear it every day from the veterans'
6 community and Congress that recently proposed access
7 standards will steer a disproportionate amount of veterans
8 and taxpayer dollars to the private sector, and despite
9 language in the Mission Act, the VA will not hold community
10 providers to the same standards of VA providers. So we
11 could end up sending more veterans into communities for
12 lower-quality care and longer wait times.

13 To top it off, nobody can tell us how many veterans
14 will be impacted by these standards or how much it is going
15 to cost. All we know is that community care is more
16 expensive than VA care and that billions have been paid to
17 third-party administrators that should have gone directly to
18 improving the lives of you and your fellow veterans.

19 The VA refers to concerns about hollowing out the VA
20 health care system as false and predictable, but everybody
21 in this room--everybody in this room--knows they are very
22 real. Veterans deserve a lot more than that. They deserve
23 the truth. They deserve a system that works, a system that
24 is built and improved with input from you, the VFW, and
25 others.

1 Mr. Lawrence, it is great to have you here today to
2 gather that input. I want to welcome and I want to thank
3 you for all that you have done and your organization is done
4 on behalf of veterans and their families. Thank you.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Isakson. It is now my pleasure to introduce
7 the gentleman from Tennessee, last year's Chairman, this
8 year's Ranking Member, Mr. Roe.

9 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

10 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and first of all I
11 want to welcome any Tennesseans who might be here. If you
12 would stand. Oh yeah, fantastic. Good. Thank you.

13 [Applause.]

14 Dr. Roe. I appreciate you being here, and Commander,
15 thank you for your team. They are great work with and
16 certainly we would not have gotten done last year what we
17 have gotten done without the help of your team.

18 And I also want to thank my colleagues at the dais,
19 because I can tell you that in my 10 years here I have never
20 worked closer with--it pains me, from the House, to say
21 anything nice about the Senate, but anyway, there were great
22 partners last year and we would not have gotten done what we
23 have gotten done for our veteran community without their
24 help, so thank you all on the Senate side. And it is a very
25 bipartisan--we try to check the Republican and Democrat at

1 the door and do what is right for our nation's heroes.

2 I was at an elementary school this week, on Monday, and
3 I asked the children--it was a fifth-grade class, and there
4 were probably 40 kids in there, and I asked them to hold up
5 their hands if they had anyone in their family who was a
6 veteran or was currently serving. About 80 percent of those
7 kids held their hand up. That is who we represent, and you
8 all, like I am, are the past and we are doing what is right
9 for our veterans, but those kids are the future, and with
10 the example they have been given by you they will also step
11 up and serve this great nation.

12 During the last two years, I do not remember a time in
13 my time here in Congress we have accomplished as much for
14 our nation's heroes. We passed an Accountability and
15 Whistleblower Protection bill. I think one of the major
16 pieces of legislation is not talked about as much but I
17 think could be transformative is the Appeals Modernization,
18 which Mike led right here. It has passed into law and is
19 now live.

20 The Forever GI Bill, which now allows a veteran--I used
21 the GI Bill when I got out of the Army.

22 [Applause.]

23 Dr. Roe. You know, who knows, with these things, how
24 fast technology is changing and rapidly, so a veteran at 50
25 years of age can go back and get retrained going forward.

1 The VA Mission Act, which can either be the most
2 transformative piece of legislation we have passed in
3 decades for the VA or it can just be another piece of paper
4 that is written and signed into law, depending on how it is
5 implemented. So I look to you to help us, and Commander
6 Lawrence and I have had discussions about that. He will be
7 coming to my district to look at some things that we have
8 done.

9 And I want to thank Chairman Takano for his continuing
10 the technology committee that we stood up, the subcommittee
11 that we stood up. Look, I told the Secretary that if we do
12 not get this Cerner, this electronic health record done
13 right we both need to go into the Witness Protection
14 Program, and it is one that we absolutely have got to get
15 right going forward.

16 And we talked about burn pits. We passed a piece of
17 legislation yesterday on the House floor. But think about
18 this. If you are allowed--if you go into DoD as an 18-year-
19 old and 50 years later something may have happened to you,
20 who knows what, if you have got that virtual lifetime
21 electronic health record we can go back and mine that data
22 and find out did it actually affect you--positively,
23 negatively, whatever? So that is hugely important.

24 Three other things very briefly I want to talk about,
25 one very near and dear to my heart. I am a Vietnam-era v.

1 I served in Korea, Camp Casey and other places in Korea.

2 [Applause.]

3 Dr. Roe. But one of the things that is very near and
4 dear to my heart are the Blue Water Navy vets. Look, we
5 left a war, in 1975, that did not go well for this country
6 and it took us a couple of decades to finally get our
7 swagger back in this country. It is time that we treated
8 those Blue Water Navy, that were off the coast of Vietnam,
9 exactly the same as we treated every other veteran that put
10 their feet on the ground there. So I need your help.

11 [Applause.]

12 Dr. Roe. To finish up, and I know the Chairman will
13 have comments about this, but another thing that troubles me
14 greatly as a physician is suicide. I just saw, the AMA
15 published a piece of information yesterday that said that
16 with alcohol and drugs and suicide, those three things,
17 almost 47 Americans per 100,000 die each year. That is not
18 only a veteran tragedy, that is an American tragedy, and we
19 have to change that.

20 We are having a roundtable this afternoon, the Chairman
21 has called, on veteran suicide. The President, as you know,
22 had a declaration yesterday, an Executive order. It is
23 going to take more than Executive orders and declarations,
24 folks. This is very troubling to me that 20, or whatever
25 the number is, commit suicide each day.

1 And lastly, our homeless veterans. Ten percent are in
2 Los Angeles County, of all the homeless veterans in America.
3 This is a scourge on our country, as wealthy as we are, to
4 have one veteran living homeless anywhere.

5 So I want to finish by thanking you for the privilege
6 to serve on this Committee. It has been. I look forward to
7 working with you all and I look forward to this Congress,
8 and I yield back.

9 Chairman Isakson. You know, we all make mistakes and I
10 made a big one early on. I got the introductions out of
11 order and I promoted the Chairman of the House Committee and
12 demoted Mr.--

13 Dr. Roe. It works for me. It is okay.

14 Chairman Isakson. --I promoted Tester, the Senator,
15 and demoted the House member, and that is a big mistake. I
16 am sure I am going to get 40 lashes later on.

17 There was probably an appropriate reason for me to do
18 that because I want to lavish some praise on him. Mr.
19 Takano has come a long way in two months, and as a Chairman
20 in the House he is doing a great job, and we are working
21 just as well together as we did with the Chairman from
22 Tennessee. So I want to take pride in introducing the
23 Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, whom I am
24 introducing last instead of first, Mr. Takano.

25 [Applause.]

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

2 Chairman Takano. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman,
3 Chairman Isakson, and no forgiveness--I mean, let me just
4 say that I made a mistake in saying that Ms. Radewagen was
5 from Guam instead of American Samoa, and so I am prone to
6 these mistakes myself.

7 Good morning, Commander, Commander Lawrence. I
8 appreciate you being here. And I do cherish the
9 relationship I have with Senator Isakson and Ranking Member
10 Roe and Senator Tester in the bipartisan way that we come
11 together to help our nation's veterans. And I want to
12 welcome every VFW member here today who has traveled the
13 distance to be here in this hearing room.

14 Commander, I want to begin by recognizing the tireless
15 advocates who work every day on behalf of the VFW, and we
16 rely on your VFW chapters in our districts and states back
17 home and here in Washington, D.C., to be the voice for the
18 millions of veterans you represent throughout the country.

19 I do want to take special--a moment to recognize my
20 California veterans. If you are in the room please stand.
21 Go California.

22 [Applause.]

23 Chairman Takano. Welcome. I would also like to thank
24 the VFW for your work on the independent budget with the DAV
25 and PVA. It is clear from your latest version that while

1 the VA is receiving robust funding there are certainly gaps
2 to close and much work left to be done before we achieve our
3 shared goals. I ask that the VFW continue to hold the
4 administration and Congress accountable and ensure both
5 fulfill our nation's promise to veterans, and we look to you
6 to guide our work.

7 With your help we have seen a lot of successes over the
8 years and we will continue to need your input as we move
9 through this Congress. In reading through your testimony,
10 your concerns are my concerns and the concerns of this
11 Committee.

12 I appreciate that your first priority is my first
13 priority, providing health care and disability benefits to
14 the Blue Water Navy, as my Ranking Member mentioned, these
15 veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. It is long past
16 time for Congress to pass H.R. 299, and I agree, Congress
17 cannot fail these veterans again.

18 Last week, during a hearing in which Secretary Wilkie
19 testified before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on
20 the state of the VA, I asked the Secretary to update me on
21 whether the administration will appeal the Court of Appeals
22 for the Federal Circuit's decision to extend these benefits
23 to Blue Water Navy veterans. I also asked him if Blue Water
24 Navy veterans eligible for disability benefits after the
25 court's decision will be able to receive health care at the

1 VA medical facilities. And although we are awaiting a
2 response from the Secretary, veterans should not be made to
3 wait. Congress must act.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Takano. During that hearing I also asked
6 Secretary Wilkie to discuss what needs to be done to achieve
7 the Committee's vision for VA 2030. The Committee's VA 2030
8 plan is simple. It is a future look at what the Committee
9 envisions to be the ideal VA, a VA ready to provide services
10 and benefits to veterans, no matter the generation or
11 conflict in which they served. That starts with getting
12 implementation of the Mission Act right so veterans can
13 access care at VA hospitals and clinics and with community
14 providers.

15 We share your similar concerns regarding access
16 standards, a focus on health outcomes, and hiring and
17 retaining providers and employees to fill the 48,985
18 vacancies at VA. These positions need to be filled.

19 The VFW's voice must be heard during the Mission Act
20 implementation and there must be an open and collaborative
21 process. Commander, I ask today that you provide us your
22 candid views on implementation thus far.

23 I also ask you to continue to highlight and advocate
24 for policies to address disparities in health outcomes for
25 minorities and LGBT veterans for Congress and the

1 administration and the nation. Please continue your
2 passionate advocacy for utilization of benefits by veterans
3 suffering from traumatic brain injury and military sexual
4 trauma, VA's progress on medical cannabis research and
5 health care services for former servicemembers with other
6 than honorable discharges.

7 I also share your disappointment that, in your own
8 words, quote, "Not a single piece of legislation became law
9 in the 115th Congress to address the needs of women
10 veterans," end quote. This must change in the 116th
11 Congress.

12 [Applause.]

13 Chairman Takano. The first veterans' bill to pass the
14 House of Representatives in this Congress was the Veterans
15 Access to Child Care Act. It enables veterans with young
16 children to see their VA provider without having to choose
17 between making their appointments and finding and affording
18 child care.

19 I want to thank Congresswoman Brownley for her tireless
20 work on that bill and I am excited to have her chair the
21 Health Subcommittee and also lead our Task Force on Women
22 Veterans. And that is the reason why this is going to
23 change in this Congress.

24 With the help of our colleagues in the Senate I expect
25 the 116th Congress will far exceed the 115th Congress in

1 addressing the needs of women and servicemembers and
2 veterans. Women veterans need to know that today's VA is
3 here to serve them, and I urge my Senate colleagues to pass
4 the Veterans Access to Child Care Act without delay.

5 VA must also take immediate action to address veteran
6 suicide and the alarming trend of veterans committing
7 suicide in VA medical facility parking lots. As the number
8 one clinical priority of the VA I am concerned that
9 resources are not being spent to tell veterans and their
10 families about the services VA provides.

11 I am also not sure if last year's presidential
12 Executive order had the impact we were all hoping for. I
13 remain concerned that we, as a nation, are not addressing
14 veterans in crisis who served in Vietnam, those not
15 utilizing VA health care, and those who served in the
16 National Guard and Reserve components who never mobilized
17 for deployment.

18 As I close I would ask you to continue to work with and
19 advise all of us here on the need for a fourth
20 administration at VA. I hear your concerns about vocational
21 rehabilitation, education services, and the transition
22 assistance program not getting the attention and advocacy
23 they deserve under the Veterans Benefits Administration. I
24 support the efforts to provide a seat at the table within VA
25 for these programs. They are vital to the success of our

1 veterans once they leave the service. However, having
2 watched VA's implementation of the Forever GI Bill, the
3 Mission Act, and the electronic health records, I have
4 concerns about VA's ability to implement a new
5 administration without a detailed and well-developed plan.

6 I would like to work with you to further develop
7 legislation to have VA create this plan and inform Congress
8 of the budgetary and personnel requirements necessary to
9 execute the plan successfully before the new administration
10 is authorized.

11 Everyone in here agrees one homeless veteran, one
12 unemployed veteran or underemployed veteran, one financially
13 unstable veteran is one veteran too many. Let us figure out
14 how to structure VA to empower employees to make the system
15 work for these veterans and structure VA to hold leadership
16 accountable for improving veteran outcomes.

17 While I touched on a few of the issue areas important
18 to you and your membership, know that I am committed to
19 helping advance your priorities in the coming year. I began
20 by saying your priorities are this Committee's priorities
21 and I meant that.

22 I look forward to hearing your testimony today and
23 thank you again for your tireless advocacy on behalf of the
24 veteran community. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield
25 back the balance of my time.

1 Chairman Isakson. Well, thank you, sir, and it is now
2 my pleasure to introduce Senator Tom Udall to introduce the
3 Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TOM UDALL, A UNITED
2 STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF NEW MEXICO

3 Senator Udall. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, Vice
4 Chairman Tester, Chairman Takano, and Ranking Member Roe. It
5 is my pleasure to appear before you today to introduce the
6 Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vincent
7 Lawrence, otherwise known as B.J. Commander-in-Chief
8 Lawrence hails from Alamogordo, New Mexico, located close to
9 Holloman Air Force Base and White Sands Missile Range.

10 Mr. Vincent served in the Army from 1983 to 1986, and
11 was stationed in South Korea where he earned the Korean
12 Defense Service Medal. He served in his community as a
13 police officer, including as an undercover agent, and was in
14 the private sector as the owner of Lawrence Investigations.
15 He joined the VFW in 2000 and has been a successful and
16 dynamic leader in that organization ever since. Last July,
17 he was elected Commander-in-Chief.

18 The VFW is the nation's largest veterans organization.
19 It is an effective advocate here in Washington and provides
20 needed services to veterans around the country. Commander-
21 in-Chief Vincent wants to move the organization forward into
22 the new millennium, bring in the younger generation
23 veterans, and reinvigorate older members.

24 His theme for his tenure is "Make It Happen." He is
25 here today to advise us on how we can make it happen for our

1 nation's veterans. And I would say to you, B.J., these two
2 committees, that could be their slogan too. They are great
3 and they are bipartisan and they make it happen for
4 veterans.

5 The VFW's legislative priorities include passing the
6 Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act to make sure that
7 veterans who served in offshore waters of Vietnam and were
8 exposed to Agent Orange received disability benefits,
9 improving veterans' health care, improving transition
10 services for servicemembers, returning home, and improving
11 the airborne hazards and open burn pit registry.

12 While I am here I would just like to say a few words in
13 particular about the last item. Along with Senator Corker I
14 sponsored the original Burn Pits Registry Act, signed into
15 law in 2013. The national registry helps veterans, doctors,
16 and the VA determine the extent that air pollution caused by
17 open-air burn pits in Afghanistan and Iraq has led to
18 medical diseases among servicemembers. But we need to
19 improve the information gathered so that veterans receive
20 the medical treatment they have earned.

21 Senator Sullivan, here in the Senate, and I are co-
22 sponsoring a new Burn Pits Registry Enhancement Act to do
23 just that. This bill has also been introduced in the House
24 on a bipartisan basis by Representatives Wenstrup and Ruiz.
25 I hope this Committee will consider this bill soon and I

1 thank you, to all the members here, for your work on behalf
2 of the nation's veterans. They served our nation, risking
3 everything, and we must make sure that they receive all the
4 benefits that they have earned.

5 And now it is my honor to give you the Commander-in-
6 Chief, Chief Lawrence. Lawrence, I am going to say I am
7 sorry to slip away on you. I have two other committees
8 meeting, but I know from your reputation that you are going
9 to knock it out of the park. Thank you very much and thank
10 you once again.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator.

13 It is now my pleasure to introduce the Commander-in-
14 Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Mr. Lawrence. And
15 Mr. Lawrence, let me tell you this. When your green light
16 goes to red I am supposed to raise hell and get you to stop.
17 I am not going to do that. I would not do that to a
18 commander anyway, but try and watch the button as much as
19 you can when it turns red so we can get everybody included
20 before the hearing is over today.

21 Thank you so much, Commander, for all you have done for
22 your country, for being here today, and for the Veterans of
23 Foreign Wars. The mic is yours.

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1 STATEMENT OF VINCENT "B.J." LAWRENCE, COMMANDER-
2 IN-CHIEF, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE U.S.;
3 ACCOMPANIED BY BOB WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR;
4 RYAN GALLUCCI, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE DIRECTOR;
5 CARLOS FUENTES, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE
6 DIRECTOR; AND DARRELL BENCKEN, NATIONAL
7 LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

8 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I begin
9 I would like to acknowledge and turn over to our Executive
10 Director, Mr. Bob Wallace, for some introductions of our
11 special guests that are here with us today.

12 Mr. Wallace. Members of the Senate and House Veterans'
13 Affairs Committees, I am honored to have the privilege of
14 introducing the national officers of the VFW and our
15 Auxiliary. Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask those to be
16 introduced to please remain standing, and I wish to request
17 the audience to holds its applause until all have been
18 introduced.

19 The National President of our Auxiliary, Sandy Kriebel,
20 from Maryland; Senior Vice President of the Auxiliary, Peggy
21 Haake, from Hawaii; Junior Vice President, Sandy Onstwedder,
22 from Michigan; National Secretary-Treasurer, Jan Owens, from
23 South Carolina; Legislative Ambassador, Kathy Voss, from
24 North Carolina; Commander-in-Chief's wife, Mary Lawrence,
25 from New Mexico; Adjutant General's wife, Kelly Jones, from

1 Missouri; Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, William "Doc"
2 Schmitz, from New York; Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief, Hal
3 Roesch, from Virginia; Adjutant General, Kevin Jones, from
4 Missouri; Quartermaster General, Debra Anderson, from
5 Missouri; Judge Advocate General, Dan Nail, from Louisiana;
6 Surgeon General, Ruth Fairchild, from Pennsylvania; National
7 Chaplain, Charlene Cobb, from Wisconsin; National Chief of
8 Staff, Jerry Herker, from Washington; Inspector General,
9 Charley Shoemaker, from Kansas; Chairman of the VFW National
10 Legislative Committee, Darrell Bencken, from Kansas;
11 Director of VFW National Legislative Service, Carlos
12 Fuentes, from Maryland; Director of VFW National Veterans
13 Service, Ryan Gallucci, from Maryland.

14 I would also like to recognize the VFW SVA fellows.
15 These student veterans exemplify the future leaders of our
16 great nation, and we also have with us many of our past
17 commanders-in-chief.

18 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 [Applause.]

20 Chairman Isakson. You being here today, Ms. Lawrence,
21 we especially welcome you. The first lady has a big job to
22 do and we know you are doing a great job supporting your
23 husband in the VFW.

24 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Mr. Wallace.

25 Chairmen Isakson and Takano, Ranking Members Tester and

1 Roe, it is my honor to represent the more than 1.76 million
2 strong, and growing, membership of the Veterans of Foreign
3 Wars of the United States and its Auxiliary. I have had the
4 privilege of visiting veteran servicemembers and their
5 families around the world to hear how the decisions you make
6 here in Washington impact their daily lives. They sincerely
7 appreciate your tireless work to improve educational
8 benefits with the Forever GI Bill, to enhance access to
9 high-quality health care and expand the caregiver program to
10 veterans of all eras with the VA Mission Act, and to
11 streamline decisions on their claims with Appeals
12 Modernization Act.

13 And we thank you for joining us in opposition to
14 privatization. I want to make it clear, up front today,
15 that the VFW will fight any attempt to privatize the VA
16 health care system.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Lawrence. And as Dr. Roe mentioned earlier in his
19 opening comments, the issue I continue to hear about the
20 most is Blue Water Navy. The 115th Congress failed to
21 restore care and benefits for Blue Water Navy veterans
22 because one Senator did not believe Agent Orange made Blue
23 Water Navy veterans sick and another veteran Senator was
24 concerned with the cost. We hope VA does the right thing by
25 accepting the VFW-supported Procopio court decision which

1 overwhelmingly confirmed veterans who served off the coast
2 of Vietnam must receive benefits.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Lawrence. VA cannot continue to deny assistance
5 for veterans who are sick and dying from Agent Orange-
6 related diseases. To ensure Blue Water Navy veterans never
7 have their earned benefits arbitrarily stripped away again,
8 this Congress--this Congress must pass the Blue Water Navy
9 Vietnam Veterans Act and make it happen.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Lawrence. The VFW was founded in 1899 by Spanish-
12 American war veterans. A century ago this year, the VFW
13 became the first veterans' organization to establish a
14 permanent presence in our nation's capital. That mission
15 continues now and that is to help veterans cut the red tape
16 and advocate for better care and benefits.

17 The VFW has spearheaded or contributed to every reform
18 and expansion of federal benefits for veterans, and this
19 include the collaborative effort between Congress, VA, the
20 VFW, and others to modernize the VA's appeals process so
21 veterans are no longer required to wait five years, on
22 average, for decisions.

23 The process to overhaul appeals was lengthy and
24 involved differing ideas and opinions. Negotiations were
25 difficult at times but resulted in everyone involved having

1 ownership of the end product. VA has continued this
2 collaborative effort through full implementation of a new
3 appeals process this past month. As a result, the new
4 process has the best interest of veterans at its core and
5 has the potential to improve appeals for benefits by the
6 brave men and women who have worn our nation's uniform.

7 With more than 2,100 accredited service officers who
8 last year assisted 526,000 veterans obtain benefits, we will
9 keep a close eye on how regional offices and the Board of
10 Appeals perform under the new framework and help VA address
11 any unintended consequences.

12 Specifically, VA must properly address the legacy
13 appeals backlog and improve quality so veterans get quick
14 and accurate decisions on their claims instead of poorly
15 developed decisions that are immediately appealed.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Lawrence. Timely access to high-quality health
18 care remains a major concern for VFW members across the
19 country. The VFW continues to assist thousands of veterans
20 who require care to cope with their service-related
21 illnesses and injuries. This includes more than 10 million
22 volunteer hours every year at VA medical facilities and to
23 help support our fellow veterans. We do so because more
24 than 80 percent of VFW members rely on the VA health care
25 system.

1 The VFW thanks you for including the views and
2 interests of our members when drafting the VA Mission Act of
3 2018, but now it is time to focus on the implementation of
4 this important and multifaceted law. Unlike appeals
5 modernization, VA has elected to largely ignore the views of
6 the nation's largest war veterans organization when drafting
7 rules to implement the VA Mission Act.

8 VA executive leadership should be embarrassed that they
9 have discontinued VA's strong collaborative relationship
10 with the VFW and instead chose to make arbitrary decisions
11 without consulting those who most intimately understand VA's
12 mission and the needs of the veterans community. VA must
13 discontinue the practice of ignoring the veteran service
14 community when making such important decisions.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Lawrence. As a result of that, the VA has betrayed
17 its sacred vow to care for all who have borne the battle by
18 proposing to charge veterans for service-connected urgent
19 care and ignored lessons learned from the Veterans Choice
20 Program by continuing to use arbitrary access standards that
21 are not tailored to the VA health care system or, most
22 importantly, not tailored to the veterans it serves.

23 Charging veterans for non-service-connected urgent care
24 to deter overreliance is not as acceptable, but VA cannot
25 charge for service-connected care regardless of where such

1 care is provided.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Lawrence. The VFW calls on Congress to conduct
4 aggressive oversight of VA Mission Act implementation to
5 ensure VA expands access to care for veterans by hiring more
6 doctors, improving VA's aging infrastructure, and properly
7 implementing the new Veteran's Community Care Program.

8 The VFW was pleased the VA elected to adopt the same
9 electronic health care record as DoD, which puts an end to
10 the saga of VA not integrating military treatment records
11 into veterans' treatment plans. With an estimated \$16
12 billion price tag, Congress must continue extensive
13 oversight to ensure the new EHR improves the delivery of
14 care to all ill and injured veterans.

15 The success of electronic health care record
16 modernization, appeals modernization, the VA Mission Act,
17 the Forever GI Bill, and other improvements created by VA or
18 established by Congress will be significantly impacted by
19 the resources VA is given. The VFW has joined our
20 independent budget partners in recommending more than \$103
21 billion for VA's budget. This can only--this can only be
22 accomplished if Congress ends sequestration.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Lawrence. Over the past four years, VFW members
25 around the world have taken an active role in addressing a

1 serious issue, suicide. VFW posts which continue to serves
2 as pillars of their communities have hosted community
3 service projects as part of our mental wellness campaign to
4 destigmatize mental health, by teaching veterans and their
5 loved ones how to identify mental distress and what local
6 resources are available for those struggling to cope.

7 Congress must play a role in reducing the rate of
8 suicide among veterans by conducting aggressive oversight of
9 VA's mental health programs and hiring efforts to ensure
10 veterans have access to care when they do turn to the VA for
11 help.

12 Congress must also expand peer-to-peer support programs
13 and pass legislation to study medical cannabis. Veterans
14 tell us medical cannabis works and is a more suitable option
15 than the drug cocktails VA prescribes. VA must consider how
16 complementary and alternate therapies can help veterans cope
17 with PTSD and other conditions such as chronic pain.

18 Suicide is a serious issue. We must do what is needed
19 to save 20 veterans who take their own lives every day.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Lawrence. The number of women veterans who have
22 turned to VA for their health has tripled since 2001. VA
23 has worked to improve gender-specific care for this
24 population of veterans but more work needs to be done.
25 Congress must pass legislation to improve the gender-

1 specific competency of VA health care providers. They must
2 give women veterans the ability to choose the gender of
3 their health care provider. They must extend the number of
4 days newborn care is covered by VA, and expand the
5 successful VA Child Care Pilot Program and require the VA to
6 continue to improve privacy at women clinics.

7 Finally, Congress must ensure VA conducts targeted
8 outreach to women so no veteran is left to wonder what
9 benefits she is eligible to receive.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Lawrence. VFW members have been exposed to toxins
12 during every war. These toxins have long-lasting impacts on
13 their health and well-being of their descendants. Burn pits
14 and other environmental hazards in Iraq and Afghanistan have
15 caused irreversible harm to our servicemembers, past and
16 present. Servicemembers in peak physical shape when they
17 deployed have come back with pulmonary issues and rare
18 cancers that prevent them from performing at high levels and
19 eventually become so severe that they can no longer keep a
20 job and need 24/7 caregiver support from their loved ones.

21 VA has failed to properly take care of these veterans.
22 So we call on Congress to pass legislation requiring VA to
23 improve the burn pit registry, to pass the Burn Pit
24 Accountability Act which would improve how DoD tracks,
25 treats, and prevents the harmful impact of burn pits, and to

1 establish and properly fund independent research on the
2 impact of burn pits to include gender-specific effects, and
3 finally, to provide veterans exposed to burn pits, like
4 those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, the care and
5 benefits they deserve and they need.

6 [Applause.]

7 Mr. Lawrence. I recently spent a week in Eastern
8 Europe with soldiers of the First Armored Brigade Combat
9 Team from Fort Riley, Kansas, who are deployed in support of
10 Operation Atlantic Resolve. They are able to focus on their
11 mission to protect America's interest abroad because they
12 know people like the VFW and you are working hard to take
13 care of them while in uniform and when they transition in
14 veteran status. Together we cannot let them down.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Lawrence. Congress must reopen transition
17 assistance in the community programs for veterans, so
18 recently discharged veterans can revisit TAP classes.
19 Congress must provide grants for organizations that connect
20 recently transitioned veterans with meaningful jobs and
21 conduct oversight to ensure that DoD is doing its job to
22 help servicemembers prepare for life after military service.

23 The VFW has long argued that military retirement pay
24 and VA service-connected disability compensation are
25 fundamentally different benefits, and granted, for different

1 reasons. We also oppose the senseless dollar-for-dollar
2 SBP/DIC offset that financially penalizes the surviving
3 spouses of military retirees. We again call on Congress to
4 enact full concurrent receipt.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Lawrence. Since 1929, the VFW has been intimately
7 involved in fulfilling America's sacred promise to recover
8 fallen Americans from long-ago battlefields. This is why
9 the VFW works so hard alongside the Defense POW/MIA
10 Accounting Agency to reunite our fallen heroes with their
11 loved ones.

12 As a Korean defense veteran, I am proud to have worked
13 with the administration to secure the recovery of 55 boxes
14 of American remains from North Korea and open the door for
15 joint field activities to resume hopefully in the near
16 future.

17 The fullest possible accounting mission is a top
18 priority of the VFW. With more than 82,000 American
19 servicemembers still unaccounted for globally, Congress must
20 provide DPAA the resources it needs to reunite our heroes
21 with their loved ones.

22 In conclusion, the VFW stands ready to help you and
23 your staff improve care and benefit for America's veterans,
24 servicemembers, their families, and survivors, just as we
25 will hold you accountable if you do not.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Lawrence. I believe your willingness to be on this
3 Committee means you will not fail, and neither will we,
4 because no one does more for veterans than the VFW, and when
5 we work together we can make it happen.

6 [Applause.]

7 [The prepared statement of Mr. Lawrence follows:]

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1 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Commander. Senator
2 Tester and I are going to waive our time at this time
3 because we have got a lot of members who are here that we
4 want to make sure they get time to ask their questions, so
5 Senator Tester and I will go at the end.
6 I do want to make, if it is all right with Jon, four points
7 real quickly.

8 Number one, I am not going to embarrass the table up
9 here by asking them to raise their hands because it is never
10 good for a Chairman to ask them to show how they are going
11 to vote on something before you have told them they are
12 going to have to show their hands to vote. But my suspicion
13 is there are no no votes up here in terms of keeping the VA
14 like it is, and nobody wants to privatize it. So I want you
15 to understand, when you made that point, privatization is
16 not an issue as far as I am concerned, and I do not think it
17 is an issue as far as the Senate is concerned. I will let
18 the House speak for itself, but do not worry about that.

19 Second, you made a great statement about ownership. I
20 want you to take some ownership too, and all the members of
21 the VFW. We are going to have problems as we get the
22 implementation of the health care and Choice and all those
23 things, and the Mission bill. It is going to be easy for
24 you to find a place where you can really raise hell and get
25 us focused on one terrible, awful circumstance, at the risk

1 of not taking all the good things that happen and building
2 them up. So please join us and take ownership with us of
3 the Mission Act and what it is doing so we can get over this
4 first hump, which always take place.

5 You know, every time you do something new everybody
6 would have done it different. And I appreciate what you
7 said about the VA reaching out. I am reaching out to tell
8 you that I want you to join our team and take ownership in
9 it as well, so we make that act work as well as we can for
10 everybody. If you do that, that would be tremendous.

11 We need your input and we need it badly. The last
12 thing I would say is this. I have never worked harder in
13 five days in my life, in the last five days of the last
14 session. The Senate did everything it could do to get the
15 Blue Water Navy bill through. But I want to tell you, Mike
16 Enzi is a great United States Senator. He did his job. He
17 is not someone that needs to be criticized for what he was
18 doing because he is the Budget Chairman. A lot of things
19 that were handed to him were things he had to do. And I
20 talked to him the other day and was at a prayer breakfast
21 with him this morning. He is helping us 110 percent,
22 talking to the VA about let us go ahead and get this thing
23 done.

24 And I met yesterday with the Secretary of the VA, Mr.
25 Wilkie, crutches and all, his and mine both, and told him I

1 saw no reason to appeal and test a course. A 9-to-2
2 decision in that court is an overwhelming decision. I hope
3 that will be the decision they take and we appreciate all
4 your advocacy and your help, that Bob Wallace gave me last
5 year. I am going to close with that. He is one good dude.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Isakson. You need to keep him on the payroll
8 because he did a great job and helped us do a lot of good
9 things, and I appreciate it very much.

10 Now we will go to Chairman Takano.

11 Chairman Takano. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman
12 Isakson. I just want to--I will be very brief with my
13 questions. I appreciate the work that the VA has done to
14 include LGBT veterans' issues in your written testimony.
15 You explained that VA's Central Office currently does not
16 have any representation for LGBT veterans and that this lack
17 of representation hinders VA's ability to address the LGBT
18 veterans' population's health and benefit disparities.

19 Commander, I hope you can speak a little bit about why
20 it is important for minority populations to have a voice and
21 representation at VA's Central Office.

22 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. By having
23 equal representation among minorities we satisfy exactly
24 what we should receive through VA health care system. That
25 is high-quality care in a timely manner across all boards.

1 No one should have a label on them. Veterans are veterans
2 and all veterans demand, all veterans should have equal care
3 across the board.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Takano. Thank you for that. My second
6 question is why do LGBT veterans need representation at the
7 VA Central Office?

8 Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Chairman, we have several different
9 minority groups that current receive care. They have
10 specific needs. They have specific health care questions
11 and desires. We need to be able to address all veterans on
12 an equal platform to be able to have VA in a position to
13 answer and to provide the veterans with the care they
14 deserve and need.

15 Chairman Takano. Well, Commander, I really appreciate
16 that sentiment from the VFW. I know that your members
17 fought on behalf of our country because they believed in
18 equality before the law and equality of opportunity for all
19 Americans, so I appreciate that. And with that I am going
20 to yield back the balance of my time. We have a lot of
21 people here who want to ask questions.

22 Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
23 Ranking Member Roe.

24 Dr. Roe. Thank you, and I thank the Chairman. He and
25 I are both on the Education Labor Committee and we have got

1 votes going on now so we are going to have to step out and
2 go vote, Commander.

3 I did fail to thank, in my opening remarks, the
4 Auxiliary who are here. Our families who are home when we
5 are deployed, keep the home fires burning, take care of all
6 the issues that are going on, paying the bills, everything
7 we do when we are out having fun, driving around, rolling
8 around in the mud and all that stuff we did.

9 But I want to thank you all for the support that the
10 Auxiliary gives that and I want to give them a round of
11 applause.

12 [Applause.]

13 Dr. Roe. Commander Lawrence, what do you think are the
14 major strengths of the VA?

15 Mr. Lawrence. Sorry. I have to remember this button
16 so I do not get yelled at by the Chairman.

17 I think the VA, honestly, has the best interest of
18 veterans at heart. As you spoke in your opening comments,
19 we made a lot of progress last year for veterans. What is
20 important now is to ensure proper implementation of all
21 those efforts and that hard work. I think we are on the
22 right track. As Chairman Takano mentioned, we just need to
23 keep a close eye on some areas and make sure, and be
24 patient. But at the same time we should be in a position,
25 as veteran service organizations, to have a hand in that,

1 because it is going to take a collaborative effort. We
2 should never be shut down and not asked for our guidance or
3 our opinions, based on veterans. We, as a veteran service
4 organization, know what is best for our veterans.

5 Dr. Roe. I agree with that and I do want to give a
6 shout-out to your team. Bob, you look great. It looks like
7 you are doing well, and he has done a lot of great work.
8 And Carlos, I am not so sure about, but anyway--

9 [Laughter.]

10 Dr. Roe. No. Carlos has been great to work with.

11 One of the issues that had, and that the Chairman
12 brought up, is the empty slots at the VA. I think that is a
13 challenge for American health care across the country. By
14 2030, we are going to have 100,000 too few doctors in this
15 country. And so we have taken a real interest in the
16 education part that the VA carries, many of us. I was
17 trained partly at a VA hospital, and I think it really
18 behooves us to try to encourage that, because the VA is
19 going to be short of physicians, as you pointed out.

20 That is one of the reasons we passed the VA Mission
21 Act, was to use not a privatization but a symbiotic
22 relationship. If I cannot see a urologist--I will give you
23 a perfect example. I have a got a text right here I got
24 last night. A veteran home with a kidney stone. They hurt.
25 And the lithotripter is not available because it is mobile,

1 so he has to wait, unless he can go out to the private
2 sector and get that done. Those are the kind of things
3 where I think we share expertise and get the best care for
4 veterans. I think that is how I view the VA mission.

5 And we tried to put a bill together, Commander, that
6 was good for urban America, which is much different than
7 rural America. I have been in congressional districts.
8 Greg Walden is in Oregon. The square miles are bigger than
9 the square miles of Tennessee, that he has got to cover. I
10 mean, he told me that. I did not believe it but he was
11 right.

12 So designing a system is difficult, and you guys sat
13 around a table in my office and helped work that out. And
14 Commander, I could not be more supportive of you, when the
15 VA leadership needs to sit down at that same table and
16 hammer these things out. That is how the Mission Act
17 occurred. It did not occur because of what Senator Isakson
18 or Tester or I did. It occurred because of what everybody
19 did together. And when we do that we will have a bill that
20 will work much better.

21 I have--on medical cannabis, you mentioned, I have a
22 bill out there that requires the VA to study this. That is
23 where it should be studied. Let us find out the risks, the
24 benefits of black box warnings and so on. I could not agree
25 more with you there.

1 Thank you all very much for being here and I appreciate
2 what you do every single day for our nation's heroes. And I
3 yield back.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Isakson. Senator Manchin.

6 Senator Manchin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
7 all of you for being here, as you all do every year. And I
8 would like to see if my West Virginia Mountaineers would
9 stand to be recognized. There we go.

10 [Applause.]

11 Senator Manchin. As usual, they are the most loyal,
12 hardest-fighting people I know and work every day to make
13 West Virginia better.

14 My question would be, as part of the VA Mission Act
15 requirements the VA recently released their access standards
16 determining when veterans can see private doctors. Under
17 the proposed rules, any veteran who must drive more than 30
18 minutes away longer than 20 days for a mental health care or
19 primary appointment would be allowed to use a private
20 doctor. While more access to care is a good thing for
21 veterans I have many questions about the impact of these
22 rules on the VA's quality of care and overall budget.

23 I have been asking and the Chairman has been very
24 accommodating, but I am asking again that we commit
25 ourselves to having this Committee hold a hearing on these

1 access standards before the VA's public comment period is
2 over, March 25th.

3 Chairman Isakson. Which will be granted.

4 Senator Manchin. Which will be granted. That is very
5 good. We are going to have that done. So all of your
6 support is great.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Manchin. So my question is how is your
9 membership--Commander, how is your membership reacting to
10 the newly proposed access standards and what is your biggest
11 concerns?

12 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you. First and foremost, that
13 access standards were written by bureaucrats who do not
14 understand the preference of our veterans who actually rely
15 on the VA health care system. That has been our biggest
16 complaint.

17 Senator Manchin. Right.

18 Mr. Lawrence. But in regards to that, we feel that the
19 20-day period is just as arbitrary as 30, and as you
20 mentioned, a very good point, and I agree with you
21 wholeheartedly, it is not one size that fits all. We have
22 different area--rural, metro areas. It does not address or
23 take all of those different factors into consideration. So
24 that would be our biggest concern right now.

25 Senator Manchin. Okay. Anybody can answer this

1 question. It is, basically, we all know how important
2 family members are in caring for severely injured veterans
3 of all eras. It is a full-time job, physically and
4 emotionally, demanding, and that is why I supported the
5 caregiver support program in the Mission Act.

6 As the VA prepares to expand the program we have
7 received reports of challenges with wait times,
8 applications, and inappropriate terminations. So anybody
9 who would want to speak to this, has a personal experience
10 and want to share it with us, on the recommendations for how
11 the VA can make the program more effective and accountable.
12 Our intentions are good but, you know, sometimes when the
13 rubber hits the ground it does not work the way we want it
14 to work. So if you can give us any direction on that we
15 would be appreciative.

16 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, and as a matter of fact Mr.
17 Fuentes, who is here with me today, he has spoken to some
18 family members and had some concerns on the Caregiver Act.

19 Senator Manchin. Sure.

20 Mr. Lawrence. If you will, Mr. Fuentes.

21 Senator Manchin. Thank you, sir.

22 Mr. Fuentes. Thank you, Chief. We are tracking that
23 issue and it is something that is very important to our
24 membership. Seriously, we do not--we cannot afford for
25 caregivers, or veterans who transfer from one facility to

1 another to be kicked out of the caregiver program. It is
2 great that VA has issued a moratorium on revocations. We
3 want to make sure that they get the IT system right and want
4 to make sure that the folks can go throughout the country
5 and continue to receive caregiver program support that they
6 need. But most importantly, we cannot allow the VA to use
7 that as an excuse to delay expansion to veterans of all
8 eras.

9 Senator Manchin. Let me follow up. One final question
10 is going to be, since I have been in the Senate--I came in
11 in late 2010--and from West Virginia, being the governor of
12 West Virginia, I was acutely aware of the unemployment, the
13 high unemployment of veterans, and I could not believe it.
14 We started a campaign called I Hire a Vet. Transitioning a
15 vet back into an active, productive life has always been a
16 challenge.

17 Are we succeeding? Is there something else that we can
18 do? Do you see anything that could improve acclimating a
19 vet back into the workplace and into a civilian role? Have
20 you had some of your vets come into you having a hard time
21 finding training or a job?

22 I will give you one example. CDLs. A lot of people in
23 the military basically are driving heavy equipment. We need
24 commercial truck drivers. Paid good money. But we want
25 that to transition into CDL. They should be able to get an

1 accelerated permit on that using the CDL experience they had
2 in the military to come right into the workforce. Those
3 types of changes we are trying to make, and any type of
4 skill set that you might have gotten while you were in the
5 military, to use that rather than going through the
6 rigmarole and all the different channels you have to in
7 order to get accredited in civilian life.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Lawrence. We agree 100 percent. I think a lot of
10 that also begins that first step is that veteran transition,
11 whether that be through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge
12 Program. As a matter of fact, Mr. Gallucci, could you
13 explain?

14 Mr. Gallucci. Absolutely, Commander-in-Chief, and
15 thank you. One of our programs that we run on 23 military
16 installations is the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program,
17 inextricably intertwined with the Transition Assistance
18 Program that the military operates, helping veterans access
19 their benefits as they are transitioning off of active duty.

20 One thing that we do to hold our representatives
21 accountable is we ask our clients what they thought of our
22 services but also what they thought of the Transition
23 Assistance Program, and a lot of that information informs
24 some of the changes that Commander-in-Chief Lawrence speaks
25 to in his written remarks, some of the changes that we are

1 asking Congress to make.

2 There is one anecdote that sticks out to me. A Marine
3 from Camp Pendleton had commented to us about the voluntary
4 tracks for the Transition Assistance Program, and when he--
5 an open-ended comment, "Why did you or did you not
6 participate in a track?" he said, "My leadership team told
7 me I was not a good candidate for college." That was
8 unacceptable and that is why we are pushing for changes to
9 the way that we transition servicemembers out of the
10 military, and one of the reasons we are asking to once again
11 offer off-base transition training like we had had with the
12 pilot program in years past.

13 Senator Manchin. Well, I encourage each and every one
14 of you to contact your local Congressperson or your U.S.
15 Senator at any time with changes you might have, suggestions
16 you might have that makes it better for you to transition
17 back into a private civilian life, and we thank you all for
18 your service. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Chairman Isakson. Senator Cassidy.

20 [Applause.]

21 Senator Cassidy. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First a
22 shout-out to my Louisiana VFW folks.

23 [Chorus of cheers.]

24 Senator Cassidy. They said Who Dat? That's the Saints
25 cheer. We are still a little bitter about that, being

1 robbed of our Super Bowl victory.

2 Thank you for the work you do, and I will echo what Roe
3 said. Thank you to the Auxiliary as well. And, Mr.

4 Gallucci, I just want to kind of pick up where you are. One
5 thing I think we can celebrate right now, under this economy
6 there is record low unemployment for veterans. Is not that
7 fantastic?

8 [Applause.]

9 Senator Cassidy. And when we speak of suicide and we
10 understand that having meaning in one's life is one of the
11 things that helps prevent suicide, having a job, a well-
12 paying job that gives one self-respect is obviously in that
13 mix. But I have learned that transition is when many
14 suicides take place, with most suicides occurring,
15 statistically, within a short period after someone's
16 separation from the service.

17 And it is interesting. I was speaking to an employer
18 back home, Performance Contracting, and I gather they are
19 one of the leading employers of veterans and they love
20 veterans because they have a sense of how to work within a
21 team, how to get a job done. They know deadlines. They
22 know consequences if deadlines are not achieved, on and on.
23 But they had to hire someone in particular to make sure they
24 could navigate these programs to get these highly qualified
25 people through the process to where they could achieve their

1 potential working for Performance. So I applaud you for
2 working on that transition.

3 Again, I am a physician. I have just learned that
4 transition planning is most important. But it occurs to me
5 they had to hire somebody to do it. It does not just happen
6 seamlessly. What can we do, on our side, to make this work
7 better? I know one of the things is that the office that
8 does this might a Department of Labor office, not
9 technically under our jurisdiction. But do you have
10 suggestions as to what we can do to make it--you do not have
11 to hire an extra person to make it happen?

12 Mr. Gallucci. Well, a few items, actually, so thanks
13 for asking that. I think, actually, a couple of our VFW SVA
14 legislative fellows have talked about what happens after you
15 transition off of active duty and is there a way to have
16 caseworkers that you can connect back to, or at least for an
17 interim period have access to the resources that the
18 military made available to you while you were on active
19 duty.

20 There is precedent for this. There was a health care-
21 centric program known as TAMP that allowed those who were
22 separated for medical reasons to get access to base
23 resources. I was talking with one of our members during
24 this conference he was basically telling me that, you know,
25 what happens when a servicemember separates in California?

1 They are used to all the resources that they have at Camp
2 Pendleton or wherever, and they move back to Delaware and
3 they do not know really where to turn. The first place they
4 are going to go to is probably going to be the military, but
5 they are going to be locked out. So is there any
6 flexibility that we can have there?

7 The next, we talk about the Off-Base Transition
8 Training program in Commander-in-Chief's written testimony,
9 and this pilot was well-intentioned but not very well
10 executed with the Department of Labor, and it was to do TAP-
11 like training around the country. There is one place it was
12 very successful, Senator Manchin's home state, in West
13 Virginia. They worked very closely with the National Guard
14 to make sure that deployed members of the Guard and Reserve
15 had access to this when they returned home.

16 So we want to see a program similar to that, and the
17 VFW has a tremendous infrastructure around the country that
18 may be able to help leverage that. There was not much
19 outreach when the OBTT pilot program was underway and so we
20 could not flex our muscle to assist wherever we could. But
21 we are eager to do that optimistic that there are some
22 targets of opportunity to reach that very at-risk
23 population.

24 Senator Cassidy. Well, I will just say that many of
25 the things discussed, whether it is suicide or whether it is

1 the ability to afford child care for dependent, or many
2 other things on your list are addressed when somebody has
3 better jobs and better wages and better benefits.

4 So thank you all for what you all are doing on that.
5 It is my commitment to work with you all as we help folks
6 transition out of serving our country to being able to serve
7 our country by other means. Thank you all very much.

8 [Applause.]

9 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator. Congressman
10 Lamb.

11 Mr. Lamb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I have learned
12 over time that in many crowds as large as this there will be
13 a certain number of Western Pennsylvanians and
14 Pennsylvanians, but due to our good fortune over the years
15 there will be an even larger number of Pittsburgh Steelers
16 fans. So I would like any Pittsburgh Steelers fan among the
17 VFW faithful to stand up and be recognized real quick so I
18 can give you a wave. Thank you, and that includes your
19 Surgeon General and your past Commander-in-Chief, Big John,
20 so happy to have you with us here today. Thank you all for
21 everything that you do for our community out in Western
22 Pennsylvania. The VFW plays a huge role in helping so many
23 people.

24 Commander Lawrence, I wanted to ask you, but you can
25 feel free to direct it as necessary. You have also served

1 our country for a long time as a member of law enforcement,
2 and we have a lot of veterans that come back and continue to
3 serve in that capacity, as did I. And one of the things
4 that we are all facing, which is really a threat to a huge
5 number of young people, in particular, is the opioid
6 epidemic. I know it has affected people out in New Mexico
7 quite a lot, and Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia,
8 Eastern Ohio have been very heavily hit by this.

9 And so one of the things that we have tried to do to
10 stem the tide is to change some of our prescription
11 practices for people who are receiving pain treatment and
12 try to get alternative, non-opioid measures to prevent
13 people from becoming addicted in the first place. And there
14 have been various levels of success around the country on
15 that.

16 I think it is a place that the Veterans Administration
17 can really lead the way, because one of the reasons we want
18 to preserve an integrated health system in the VA, and not
19 just slice-and-dice the entire thing and give it out to the
20 private sector, is because when you have something like
21 substance abuse and pain treatment and a co-occurring
22 psychological condition all affecting the same patient, it
23 really helps to have specialists in all three of those areas
24 under the same roof. And inside of VA hospital they are
25 usually under the same roof, they usually know each other,

1 and they usually share the same mission, which is to really
2 take care of the veteran.

3 So I think we have a chance to do this really well and
4 teach the rest of the country how to do it, but I would love
5 to hear from you about the way the opioid epidemic is
6 affecting your members, but in particular, how it might be
7 affecting those who are getting pain treatment and have
8 gotten alternatives to opioid medications, and how it is
9 going. Thank you.

10 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you. Well, first off, as you
11 know, the opioid epidemic is not specific. It is affecting
12 everyone in society as a whole. But as it pertains to our
13 veterans, I think one of the key issues is going to be to
14 continue to advocate that the VA aggressively pursues
15 research in the area of cannabis. In fact, with us today we
16 have a fellow from Louisiana who is aggressively pursuing
17 legislation that would demand VA to do research in the area
18 of cannabis.

19 But as you said, we agree with that statement.
20 Alternate forms of pain management are going to be the key.
21 But certainly do not want to put ourselves in a position
22 where we have veterans utilizing cannabis or other means
23 that have not had an opportunity to go through the study and
24 research process. At the end of the day, we need to know,
25 is this going to work? Is it not going to work? How is it

1 going to affect veterans and their health, or how is it not
2 going to affect them? So I think that is the avenue we need
3 to pursue aggressively.

4 Mr. Lamb. Thank you very much, Commander, and Mr.
5 Chairman, I yield back my time.

6 Chairman Isakson. Mr. Bergman.

7 Mr. Bergman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is good to
8 see so many familiar faces sitting at the head table here.
9 You know, as a proud life member of the VFW--

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Bergman. --by the way, any Michiganders here? All
12 right. There is one. Good. There you go--three, four.
13 Look at that. You guys pop up like Whack-a-Mole in Chuck E.
14 Cheeses. Glad you are here.

15 You know, like so many folks at the end of World War
16 II, my dad being one, when they came back to all over
17 America but especially Small Town America, they did what
18 they believed the right thing to do was, which was, number
19 one, go back into civil society and build our nation after
20 the war.

21 But what they also did was created so many local VFW
22 posts so they could sit down, have a cup of coffee, have a
23 beer, have a time together where not only the servicemembers
24 spent their time together and, in some ways, self-treated
25 themselves when it came to the rigors that they had seen in

1 Europe or in the South Pacific. And I remember as a kid
2 growing up, I was that little, you know, 6-, 7-year-old kid
3 that was walking around sweeping up at the VFW but listening
4 to the conversations. They were emotional, they were
5 strong, but they were therapeutic.

6 And as we move forward today, as you, as the VFW, or
7 any of the other veteran service organizations, we are
8 better because we help each other, and that eyeball-to-
9 eyeball interaction that we have is going to go a long way
10 towards the mental health of our young veterans.

11 Now I would like to talk a little bit about transition
12 training, because I was listening to the testimony here. And
13 just one quick question. Are you focused on the transition
14 for a 20-plus-year individual or are you focused on the
15 transition for a 4-year, you know, young man or woman who
16 served honorably for 4 years, they all signed an 8-year
17 commitment so now they have got 4 years in the IRR before
18 they are released. Where is the focus on the transition
19 training?

20 Mr. Lawrence. The focus actually has to be on both.

21 Mr. Bergman. Where do you put the emphasis, though? I
22 mean, do you see--because you can say "both" but unless you
23 tailor it. Because at one point you are talking to a 22-
24 year-old and at another point you are talking to a 40-year-
25 old. And, oh, by the way, when you walk out the door in 20

1 years, what are you walking out with? You are walking out
2 with a little bit of a pension so you have got kind of a
3 little, you know, financial nest egg coming in where maybe
4 your needs are not quite as immediate.

5 And now these are Marine Corps stats, but if 100 young
6 men and women enlisted in the Marine Corps today, at the end
7 of their first enlistment roughly 70 to 75 of them would
8 say, "It has been great fun. It has been an honor. But I
9 have got some things I want to do in the civilian world."
10 So we build our career force on about 25 percent of those
11 who originally walk in the door.

12 So I look at the majority. So I am looking at that 22-
13 to 26-year-old transition, which is a whole lot different.
14 So any thoughts on that and how we are doing that
15 specifically?

16 Mr. Lawrence. I think they both--let me clarify my
17 statement of "both." It was kind of open-ended. I do think
18 they both offer unique challenges, individual challenges,
19 because of the different demographics. Ryan, if you would?

20 Mr. Gallucci. Sure. Thank you, Chief. General
21 Bergman, good to see you again.

22 Mr. Bergman. Always good to see you, Ryan.

23 Mr. Gallucci. And so when we say we focus on both, for
24 retirees there are obviously different benefit packages that
25 they can take advantage of and different advantages, and

1 even, in some ways, disadvantages they may have when they
2 transition. But a lot of our focus for the work that we do
3 on military installations right now, we try to focus it
4 toward the junior enlisted separating servicemember, the
5 one-termers. And the reason is because there is usually a
6 larger deficit in what they are entitled to.

7 There is something tragic happening here, though. We
8 took a look at our clients that serve on military
9 installations, and except for one exception most of them we
10 predominantly serve are retirees. And we believe the reason
11 is because it is harder to reach that younger audience.
12 They are not thinking about their future in the same way.

13 I like to say there is no reasonable way for a
14 servicemember to anticipate the challenges they are going to
15 face in civilian life until the uniform comes off. And so
16 what we try to do when we interact with a transition
17 servicemember is tell them where they can go for assistance
18 in their community when they go home. But I have had the
19 opportunity to sit in on some TAP briefings and even talk to
20 some young servicemembers, and it is harder to get that
21 message to resonate. A retiree has been preparing for the
22 end of their career for a very long time, in many instances,
23 and we even had one retiree who had a misconception about
24 the services we provide on benefits and thought it was for
25 retirees.

1 Mr. Bergman. I hate that my time is--and you and I--
2 Ryan and I know each other very well because we have had
3 many discussions over a long period of time, and the
4 challenge--and I see my time has passed--but I believe there
5 is an opportunity for all, especially the VFW, to work with
6 those different services who have responsibility for the
7 individual Ready Reserve. They are obligors to reach out,
8 because that is exactly that population that you are talking
9 about. It is a challenge. And I think there is opportunity
10 for collaboration between the services and the VSOs in that
11 IRR population.

12 I yield back, sir.

13 Chairman Isakson. You know, I was an NCO. I know
14 better than to criticize a general.

15 [Laughter.]

16 Chairman Isakson. Mr. Levin, Congressman Levin, can I
17 ask you a question? Which one are--are you the famous
18 Michigan Levin?

19 Mr. Levin. No. I am the less-famous Levins of
20 California.

21 Chairman Isakson. Well, they are a good family.

22 Mr. Levin. The more-famous Levins are in Michigan.

23 Chairman Isakson. Tell them I said hey.

24 Mr. Levin. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so
25 grateful for the opportunity to join you here today. Thank

1 you, Commander. I also have a great responsibility. I am
2 the new Chair of the House Economic Opportunity
3 Subcommittee, and I am really grateful for your testimony on
4 a lot of the issues that our subcommittee is going to be
5 covering, and I am just really excited to be working with
6 you, because you are going to be a critical partner.

7 Veterans' issues are so critically important to my
8 district. Camp Pendleton is right in the middle, right at
9 the heart of our district, with I MEF, and then we have got
10 Orange County and San Diego County. So our district, I
11 think, is an example of just so many great VSOs doing
12 amazing work all around our community, and I look forward to
13 having best practices from there hopefully spread across the
14 country and in those areas where we still are having issues,
15 like homelessness being one of them, where we can learn best
16 practices across the country.

17 I do have a couple of questions and I wanted to address
18 homelessness again. Deeply familiar to us in Southern
19 California, in general. We had a gentleman who does a lot
20 of work with local VSOs in our office yesterday morning. He
21 estimates we have around 1,300 homeless veterans in our
22 greater area, which is, you know, 1,300 too many. And I am
23 curious what you think we can do to strengthen and improve
24 the HUD-VASH program and some of the related programs that
25 are available.

1 Mr. Lawrence. Well, one of the areas that we see that
2 could definitely be addressed and corrected is as it
3 pertains to what we call couchsurfing. So currently, VA
4 waits until a veteran is "under a bridge" before they are
5 offered the services, as you know, and able to take part in
6 those homeless veterans' programs.

7 When we have a homeless who may have this family member
8 allow them to stay with them for a week, and a buddy or a
9 friend they met stay them this week, as you know, that
10 denies that veteran an opportunity to participate in a
11 homeless veteran program. I think we need to pursue that in
12 itself. I think we need to make some changes with the VA.
13 A homeless veteran is a homeless veteran, and as I say all
14 the time, and I said it today in my testimony, no veteran
15 should ever not have a roof over their head or worry about
16 where their next meal is going to come from.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Lawrence. It is staggering, but, of course, it has
19 got to take a collaborative effort on everyone's part. We
20 have good folks out there doing good things. We have a
21 large VFW community in Florida that provides thousands of
22 meals to homeless veterans, on a daily basis. But it going
23 to take all of us to solve the homeless veterans' issues,
24 and I think this would be a great first step in identifying,
25 or if we have to redefine, whatever we need to do to say

1 they are homeless veterans and not merely a couchsurfer, if
2 you will.

3 Mr. Levin. Thank you, Commander. I also appreciated
4 reading about your effort to create a fourth administration
5 to oversee VA economic opportunity programs, and I share
6 your dedication to making sure these programs receive
7 resources and attention that they need. I know that
8 Chairman Takano has brought a bit about this issue to light
9 as well, and I am very pleased that the Chairman is
10 interested to making sure the VA structure improves
11 veterans' outcomes in this regard.

12 So beyond generating increased attention for economic
13 opportunity at VA, what do you think the other benefits
14 might be of the proposal to create a fourth administration?

15 Mr. Lawrence. The big one, I think, is going to be as
16 it relates to the voc rehab piece, of course. It puts
17 veterans back to work and keeps them off the unemployment
18 line. First and foremost, that is going to be our first
19 line of defense.

20 The funding has been flatlined for years and not enough
21 attention has been paid, as you know, to this critical
22 program. The way we answer that is VA must continue to hire
23 counselors.

24 Mr. Levin. Very good. I want to thank you again so
25 much for all you do. I learned much about patriotism and

1 service from grandfather on my dad's side who was a World
2 War II veteran and I am just so grateful to have the
3 opportunity. He is not with us but I know he would be
4 grateful that his youngest grandson has the chance to work
5 with you all. You are my heroes. Thank you all so much.

6 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you so much.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Isakson. Let me apologize. I am going to
9 have to slip out. Ranking Member Tester is going to finish
10 the hearing for me, in a bipartisan effort, if that is okay.
11 To show you how bipartisan we are, we just handed off to one
12 another, Democrat and Republican alike.

13 I want to thank all of you for the great testimony,
14 thank all the members for being here, and it is my pleasure
15 to recognize Congresswoman Radewagen.

16 Ms. Radewagen. Thank you, Chairmen Isakson and Takano,
17 and Ranking Members. I want to thank you all for your
18 service to our great nation. It is that sacrifice that
19 allows us to be here today, and we are all most grateful.

20 I also want to thank you all for being here today to
21 inform Congress of the VFW's legislative priorities for the
22 116th Congress. Your advocacy on behalf of our nation's
23 veterans is legendary, and I know that I can speak for
24 everyone here this morning when I say that this entire
25 Committee, on both sides of the aisle, are fully dedicated

1 to ensuring that the Federal Government lives up to our end
2 of the bargain when it comes to providing the best resources
3 and services to our veterans.

4 I want to extend a special thank you to the VFW
5 Hawaiian-Pacific delegation for meeting with me in person
6 yesterday, and thank you to High Chief Igafo Maria Va'a,
7 Hawaii VFW State Commander, who hails from American Samoa.

8 [Applause.]

9 Ms. Radewagen. Thank you for all the hard work you and
10 the rest of VFW Hawaii do on behalf of our Pacific veterans.
11 As a member who represents a U.S. territory I am
12 particularly interested to hear about your priorities for
13 those veterans who live in either rural or remote locations,
14 such as my home district of American Samoa, where our people
15 enlist into the U.S. Armed Services at a rate higher than
16 that of any other state or territory in the nation. This is
17 a fact that we are all very proud of.

18 In the past, our veterans in these rural and remote
19 locations have often been denied the services they have
20 earned--not purposefully--but often they do not know the
21 resources available to them or must travel long distances to
22 receive services.

23 So I look forward to working with the VFW and other
24 VSOs to improve the outreach to these areas in partnership
25 with the VA and welcome your input in this mission.

1 Thank you again for being here today. Your work is so
2 important in ensuring that Congress is fully informed on
3 those issues that are most important to our veterans, and
4 thank you again for your service to our grateful nation.

5 Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of
6 my time. Soifua.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Tester. [Presiding.] Congressman Cisneros.

9 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you very much. I would like to
10 thank all of you for coming out today, the VFW showing up in
11 force. I would especially like to recognize those from
12 California, especially Art Napiwocki, Deb Johnson, Tommy
13 Dorsey, Tim Bryant, Mike Seward, and Nick Guest. So thank
14 you all for coming out here and supporting our veterans.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Cisneros. I always like to say that I am the
17 grandson of veterans, the father--I mean the son of a
18 Vietnam veteran, and I am also a veteran myself. My father
19 is a lifetime member of the VFW. He got that membership
20 that was bought to him by his uncle, who was also a lifetime
21 member. And so, again, I just want to thank you all for
22 your service.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Cisneros. You know, one issue that has always been
25 important to me is education, and, of course, we know how

1 transformative the GI Bill can be. In fact, I used the GI
2 Bill myself in order to help me continue my education. And
3 right now Congress passed the Forever GI Bill, which is one
4 of the biggest changes to it since the post-9/11 GI Bill,
5 but the VA had some problems with the implementation with
6 that.

7 So going forward, as we get to that point to where we
8 are going to impellent this come this December, the end of
9 the year, how can Congress, working with the VFW, ensure
10 that the rollout is smooth and that we take care of these
11 issues and we do not have a problem, you know, with that
12 young Marine that you met with, that said, you know, people
13 denying him access to his benefits, which, to me, is 100
14 percent uncalled for and we cannot allow that to happen. So
15 how can Congress, working with the VFW, make sure that we
16 get a smooth transition of the Forever GI Bill?

17 Mr. Lawrence. One of the key ways is to bring in
18 veteran group schools to make sure that it is implemented
19 properly. That way VA does not develop their changes in a
20 vacuum. That was a lot of the problem.

21 But also with any type of electronic transition, one,
22 the personnel utilizing those systems has to be trained
23 properly and the system is only as good as the people
24 inputting the information. I think that is the first step.

25 Mr. Cisneros. You know, like many of my colleagues

1 here had said today, transition assistance or the TAP
2 program is something that is very important to me, and I
3 also serve on the House Armed Services Committee. And I
4 just want to let you know that this a key issue that I am
5 going to continue to work on, on both committees that I
6 serve on, to make sure that our veterans get that smooth
7 transition from active duty service into veteran status. I
8 think the problem too often is that the emphasis is put on
9 the individual to go out and seek the benefits from the. We
10 have got to finish that and make sure that the benefits are
11 given to the individual when they get out of service.

12 So I just want to make this commitment to you, that I
13 am going to continue to work on that, as I serve on both of
14 these committees, because we need to take care of our
15 veterans and make sure that they are getting the health care
16 that they need, making sure that they are getting the
17 education benefits that they need, and all the benefits that
18 they deserve and that they committed part of life of service
19 to that they earned.

20 So I just want to thank you all again for being here,
21 thank you for your service to our country, and God bless all
22 of you.

23 [Applause.]

24 Senator Tester. Thank you, Congressman. Next we have
25 the co-sponsor of the Deborah Sampson Act that will allow

1 our women veterans to get the promises that we have made to
2 them, my good friend from Arkansas, Senator Boozman.

3 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Senator Tester, very much,
4 and thank you, Commander, for being here and sharing your
5 thoughts as to what we need to be doing, the priorities, and
6 then also your great team. They do a tremendous job. I am
7 afraid of my boss. He is a big guy. I am afraid he will
8 whip me.

9 But the other thing I would like to say is how much
10 appreciate the Auxiliary. We know who is the backbone of
11 the group and does a tremendous job, so thank you all for
12 your service.

13 And as I have said before to the groups, you know, we
14 are up here, and this is a very bipartisan group, as you can
15 see, trying to get the job done. We are kind of the tip of
16 the spear but we cannot do it without your help. And the
17 fact that you look out and you see standing room only, that
18 is the most important think. And so thank you, all of you,
19 for making the trip and being part of this, talking to your
20 Senators or Congressmen, telling them how important these
21 things are, and reminding them that these are not give-mes.
22 These are earned benefits.

23 I want to give a special shout-out to our folks from
24 Arkansas. Can you wave your hand? Very good. We
25 appreciate you guys.

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Boozman. Nobody does a better job than they.
3 And like the rest of you do a great job of communicating to
4 myself and my staff how the policies that we are talking
5 about impact the veterans of Arkansas.

6 I want to really concentrate on two things today. I
7 would like to talk a little bit about the implementation of
8 the Mission Act, which is such a big thing, and then also,
9 as was pointed out by Senator Tester, the efforts in trying
10 to make it such that we can better accommodate our women
11 veterans in the force.

12 Commander, in your testimony you said the VA, Congress,
13 veterans' organizations must work collaboratively to ensure
14 that the Mission Act is implemented in the way that it needs
15 to be done. You also noted that you were disappointed in
16 the VA not using the voices of your 1.6 million members out
17 there in the decision-making process of access standards,
18 the development of that.

19 What do you believe the VA should do to better ensure,
20 going forward, that they are bringing veterans and VSOs into
21 the process?

22 Mr. Lawrence. First and foremost, let me be clear. In
23 past years we have not had or seen obstacles with the VA
24 that we are seeing today as it pertains to what I spoke
25 about. For some reason when it came to access standards it

1 was a big secret. It was like we were working on a special
2 project and nobody could get a hold of the information, and
3 quite frankly, we did not know about it until it was
4 released.

5 If VA would have taken the time to, one, recognize the
6 valuable input that the veteran service organizations could
7 lend to developing those access standards, they set
8 themselves up in a better arena not to fail. We know what
9 our veterans want and need as it comes to health care. We
10 asked repeated. As a matter of fact, as an example, we kept
11 being told, "We will let you know next week. We will let
12 you know next week." Next week never came. Finally, the
13 final rollout came and then we--that is where we discovered
14 that there were some issues with the access standards.

15 Just gathering that valuable information ahead of time,
16 it could have saved VA from having some issues with the
17 access standards.

18 Senator Boozman. Very good, and I agree totally as
19 does, I think, the Committee.

20 In regard to the Deborah Sampson Act we appreciate
21 Senator Tester's leadership in that area. We came forward,
22 reintroduced that this year, and we appreciate your support
23 of the bill, and we are going to work really hard to make
24 sure that we get it done.

25 In this year's bill we have increased reporting

1 requirements for women's health care providers and for
2 infrastructure needs unique to women's health care delivery
3 so that we can make the best resource decisions to improve
4 care for our women veterans.

5 And we very much, in the spirit of what you just talked
6 about, you do have a tremendous group out there, many of
7 them women, and so we will be looking to you all for
8 leadership.

9 Very quickly, in just a minute, do you have any
10 suggestions in that regard now as to what we need to focus
11 on? It is kind of an open-ended question.

12 Mr. Lawrence. I know where you are going. Thank you.

13 Yes, we definitely need to continue our focus on
14 expanding mental health expertise for postpartum disorders.
15 We need to definitely improve gender-specific competencies
16 and, as you know, expand newborn care in the child care
17 pilot. And we continue seeing concerns among our women
18 veterans--we hear it repeatedly, as it pertains to privacy.
19 We have a large women veterans voice. In fact, with me
20 today I have seven women veteran commanders of their
21 prospective states that are in leadership roles in the VFW.

22 [Applause.]

23 Senator Boozman. Thank you. Senator Tester.

24 Senator Tester. Senator Blumenthal.

25 Senator Blumenthal. Thanks, Senator. Thank you all

1 for being here. Thank you to you, Commander Lawrence, for
2 your service and your leadership, and to all of the VFW
3 members from Connecticut. If there are any here, please
4 stand so I can thank you personally.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you. Thank you for being
7 here. Thank you for your leadership.

8 I cannot tell you how important you are as a presence
9 and as a face and voice, the veteran service organizations,
10 and most particularly this one has played such a vital role
11 in expanding health care, as well as job opportunities and
12 skill training, really across the board, and still we have a
13 lot more to do. And so I really want to commit to you that
14 we will be listening--we will be listening to the VFW going
15 forward.

16 I hope that the VA will be listening to you as well. I
17 hope the VA will heed and hear views of your members as I
18 have done in my state of Connecticut, because you are the
19 source of insight and wisdom for them as well, and most
20 especially on the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act.

21 I came within a hair of gaining unanimous consent in the
22 Senate for this measure. I will not use my time to go
23 through the labyrinth of delay and obstacles that we almost
24 overcame.

25 But now we have the opportunity, not just through

1 legislation but through the VA declining to take an appeal.
2 All the VA has to do to provide this vital assistance to the
3 Blue Water Navy veteran is to decline to take an appeal from
4 the recent court decision. I hope they will hear from you,
5 to tell them the court has decided there is no reason for
6 any more delay in treating the Blue Water Navy veterans
7 fairly and effectively.

8 [Applause.]

9 Senator Blumenthal. Likewise, on other kinds of
10 legislation where there were toxic substances on the
11 battlefield, whether it is the Fairness for Korean DMZ
12 Veterans Act, the Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act, which
13 I did as a result of one of my constituents, Jerry Wright,
14 championing this measure, ride across the country with
15 "Sprayed and Betrayed" on the back of his motorcycle. And,
16 in fact, some of you probably know Jerry. Jerry is a
17 tireless advocate for our veterans.

18 And I want to say, as well, Commander, that these
19 issues of exposure to toxic substances, I know the VFW has
20 done some great work on it, do you plan to continue that
21 work?

22 Mr. Lawrence. Most definitely. We are going to
23 continue that work until all of our veterans receive the
24 care they deserve.

25 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Blumenthal. On the VA access standards for
3 private health care, I am really delighted and grateful that
4 Chairman Isakson has said to us today that there will be a
5 hearing on the VA's implementation of the Mission Act. I
6 hope you agree that congressional oversight is necessary
7 before the final publications of regulations for the Mission
8 Act. I hope we have your agreement on that.

9 Mr. Lawrence. You do.

10 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, sir.

11 Let me say, finally, the President, yesterday--I am
12 sure it has been observed before--has established a task
13 force on veteran suicide. I welcome that action, but I hope
14 also that the VA will commit to using the funds that have
15 been appropriated for veteran suicide and outreach to
16 veterans who may be at risk of suicide, so they can be
17 brought into the system and that they can provided with the
18 excellent care that is available for them.

19 So I hope that the VFW will support our efforts to
20 require the VA to use the existing money for greater
21 outreach.

22 Mr. Lawrence. Yes, sir. I also agree. The Executive
23 order is going in the direction we are looking for. I
24 believe it is going to take a collaborative effort on all of
25 our parts, if we have any hope of putting an end to veteran

1 suicide, and definitely we need to ensure the funding is
2 available for those programs and the outreach and counseling
3 that the veterans need for that.

4 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you very much. Thank you,
5 Commander. Thank you to your excellent team, and thank you
6 for being here today.

7 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Senator Tester. Yeah. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Tester. Congressman Banks.

11 Mr. Banks. Thank you to the Ranking Member and
12 Chairman Takano. It is great to be with you, Commander, to
13 the VFW team. As a proud member of the VFW myself I am
14 reminded how important of an investment that I make--

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Banks. --every year when I pay my dues, when I see
17 you.

18 This has been a good week for veterans, right, from the
19 President's Executive order that the Senator just talked
20 about to what happened in the House yesterday, passing the
21 Burn Pit Registry Enhancement Act, that will impact veterans
22 from the war in Afghanistan, like myself, and other veterans
23 who are here in the room today. That is piece of
24 legislation that passed with broad bipartisan support in the
25 House that we need to see passed through the Senate as well.

1 None of that is possible without your work and your
2 activism on Capitol Hill, so that is why I am proud to
3 welcome all of you here today.

4 I understand we have a number of Hoosier veterans in
5 the room. If you would stand it would be great to see your
6 faces.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Banks. I appreciate your leadership at the state
9 level and every time you come and visit me. Rich Mrozinski,
10 Eric Bellman, Michael Sims, Greg Baker, Troy King, Corey
11 Mahan, thank you very much. God bless you for the work that
12 you do for our Hoosier veterans and our veterans nationwide.

13 I will be brief and end with that, but again, we cannot
14 do our job in advocate as effectively as possible for
15 veterans without your support, and the VFW is second to none
16 in your activism and we appreciate all that you do.

17 Thank you, and have a great day. I yield back.

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Tester. Thank you, Congressman. Senator
20 Blackburn.

21 Senator Blackburn. Thank you to the Ranking Member and
22 the Chairman, and especially thank you to each of you for
23 taking the time to be here and to advocate for your issues.
24 I have had the opportunity to visit a couple of times this
25 week with our Tennessee delegation and I bet they are in

1 this room somewhere, wearing their orange ties. Raise your
2 hands.

3 There you go. I told you.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Blackburn. You know, we are ready for some UT
6 basketball, are we not? We are going to win.

7 But I do want to say thank you for your service and I
8 know that I do not stand alone in saying our hope is that
9 the service we give the country honors the service that you
10 have given, and we appreciate, more than you know, what you
11 have done.

12 We are focused on your issues and know them well. The
13 burn pit registry, we have discussed this with some of our
14 Tennesseans, making certain that we deal with the Blue Water
15 Navy issues, the concerns that are there, the women's health
16 issues for women veterans, looking at the contribution of
17 our spouses, making certain that we deal with the issues
18 that affect our spouses and widows of our veterans, and, of
19 course, as we have mentioned already, the mental health
20 issues.

21 I want you to know, too, that we are going to continue
22 to work on access to health and health care. This past
23 Friday, I had the opportunity to go to the Gallatin,
24 Tennessee, Veterans Clinic that was opening. And I have
25 four veterans that are members of our team. Three of them

1 were with me for that clinic. And I appreciated so much
2 that this is a whole-of-life clinic, one of the new models
3 of clinics that are opening that deal with every specter of
4 health care that you all need, and it is all right there in
5 one place.

6 And, Commander, during that visit, as we opened that
7 clinic, there was a lot of talk about expanding the Mission
8 Act and allowing a veteran to take their card and go to a
9 clinic in their home community for primary care and be able
10 to get that and then come to a specialized clinic for
11 specialized care, but utilizing telemedicine and digital
12 imaging and some of these health care technology
13 advancements that we have had.

14 And I would love to hear from you, just a second, your
15 thought very quickly on what you would like to see us do to
16 expand the Mission Act and to expand those choices and
17 options for our veterans.

18 Mr. Lawrence. The veteran must always have the choice
19 when it comes to health care. The veteran should always
20 receive high-quality health care in a timely manner. I
21 think there is not one easy answer, because as we know, the
22 private sector, studies show the private sector cannot
23 always provide that care faster than the VA. We still see
24 issues where a veteran goes out into the private sector only
25 to find out, oh, now my appointment time is going to be

1 three months in the private sector, so then they come back
2 to the VA and they are put back in the back of the queue
3 again.

4 That is what we are trying to avoid. We are trying to
5 avoid those long wait times and that delayed care.

6 Senator Blackburn. I appreciate that, and that is one
7 of the reasons I think the new style clinic is so vitally
8 important, because you can get mental health, you can get
9 women's health, you can get primary care, you can have
10 telemedicine available for behavioral health, and then you
11 can receive those referrals right there in that clinic. And
12 my hope is the VA will pick up the pace and get more of
13 these clinics deployed in communities across the country.

14 We are so grateful that you all are here. Thank you so
15 very much, and I yield back my time.

16 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator.

17 [Applause.]

18 Senator Tester. Congressman Cunningham.

19 Mr. Cunningham. Well, it is almost afternoon so I will
20 say good afternoon and thank you all for coming. I
21 represent the First Congressional District of South
22 Carolina. It stretches from Charleston all the way down to
23 Hilton Head, and is objectively the best district in the
24 entire country. I can say that. And I can say also that
25 the veterans have realized that as well, as our district has

1 the highest percentage of population of veterans in the
2 entire state of South Carolina.

3 And, you know, I was honored to have a female veteran
4 come into our office just yesterday and bring to our
5 attention that in the entire state of South Carolina there
6 are only two OB-GYNs employed by the VA in the entire state.
7 And so I guess my question to you, Commander, is do you
8 think that is anywhere near enough, and what can we be doing
9 to take care of the women's health care as the number of
10 women veterans are expected to rise and rise, and what can
11 we be doing in South Carolina and within the VA itself?

12 Mr. Lawrence. I do not think it is South Carolina-
13 specific. I can tell you right now, two OB-GYN positions is
14 not enough.

15 But on a serious front, that is actually what we have
16 been advocating for. As we know, the VA has over 40,000
17 openings of staff, openings that need to be filled. With
18 that we would advocate that they need to seek out
19 aggressively and get practitioners in to answer the needs of
20 our women veterans. Women veterans still have--they still
21 want to choose the gender of their medical practitioner and
22 they can only do that, one, if the VA is staffed
23 appropriately and if the VA takes the time to take into
24 consideration the specific needs of our women veterans.

25 [Applause.]

1 Mr. Cunningham. I appreciate that. Can you give any
2 other advice or guidance as to what VA can be doing to do a
3 better job of recruiting, retaining, and expanding that
4 practice for future?

5 Mr. Lawrence. Well, they have to have the flexibility
6 and support to attract those medical physicians and
7 specialists to want to come to the VA to work, but the VA
8 cannot do that if their hands are tied. They need to be
9 able to offer incentives or whatever they need to do to get
10 folks to come work for them.

11 Mr. Cunningham. I appreciate that, Commander. Thank
12 you for time. Thank you, each and every one of you, for
13 your service as well.

14 [Applause.]

15 Senator Tester. Thank you, Congressman.

16 Well, we have come to the most entertaining part of
17 this hearing, because since Johnny gave me the gavel I am
18 going to call on Senator Sullivan first, followed
19 immediately by Senator Tennis, regardless if a Democrat
20 comes in or not, simply because we can talk about the
21 metrics of how many veterans are in each one of these guys'
22 states.

23 So, Senator Sullivan, you have the floor.

24 Senator Sullivan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I
25 appreciate that, and I am glad you previewed a little bit of

1 my comments. I do want to just do a quick shout-out and ask
2 for my fellow veterans from Alaska. If you are here can you
3 please stand? How about a round of applause for them? All
4 right. There we go.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Sullivan. David and Bill, Walter, Todd,
7 Charlotte, Liz, thank you for being here. You know, you are
8 right. We all brag about our states, but we are all doing
9 it for the right reasons because we are so proud of all of
10 you. I mean, you know, there is a lot of talk about the 1
11 percent in America. I like to say this is the actual less
12 than 1 percent of America, the less than 1 percent who have
13 the courage to raise their right hand to support and defend
14 the Constitution and possibly die for their country. So how
15 about a round of applause for the real 1 percent.

16 [Applause.]

17 Senator Sullivan. And we also, you know, like to brag
18 a little bit about our states as it relates to veterans. My
19 state, the great state of Alaska, has more vets per capita
20 than any state in the country. Now Senator Tillis and I, he
21 is from North Carolina, we joke about some metrics and I am
22 sure he will have some counterpunches. So I just will not
23 raise the fact that Alaska is 14 times the size of North
24 Carolina, I am not going to raise that. It is a little
25 embarrassing so I will not raise it here in this Committee.

1 I also want to just mention, you know, I have been a
2 member of this Committee my whole time in the Senate, but I
3 had always thought that the rules did not allow you to join
4 the VFW if you were still serving in the military, in the
5 Reserves. I am still in the Reserves. I am a colonel in
6 the Marine Corps Reserves.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Sullivan. That is right, for the Marines here.
9 Oorah. But, Bill Yudiskas, one of the great former
10 commanders in Alaska has been a good advocate and has
11 convinced me that the rules do not say that, that if you
12 qualify to be a VFW member you can join, even if you are
13 still serving in the Reserves. So I want to say proudly to
14 Bill and others from Alaska, this is my first hearing as a
15 full-fledged member of the VFW.

16 [Applause.]

17 Senator Sullivan. There is my card. Post 9785 in
18 Eagle River, Alaska. So I am proud to join this great
19 organization, finally. So thank you, Bill, for your strong
20 advocacy--I would say your incredibly relentless advocacy.

21 So, Commander, I actually wanted to ask a serious
22 question. In your testimony you mentioned some of the
23 reforms in the 2019 NDAA. I also serve with Senator Tillis
24 on the Armed Services Committee that drafts that bill, that
25 talks about some of the Transition Assistance Programs. And

1 I always think is an area where we can do better.

2 You may have seen--I am sure you all did--I just came
3 from a hearing on the Commerce Committee that talked about
4 the maritime industry. You may have seen yesterday the
5 President issued an Executive order to make it easier to get
6 our veterans into the maritime industry, because our
7 veterans have so many skills that they learn in the military
8 and they can take to private industry. And now with this
9 very low unemployment rate in the country our companies need
10 the great opportunities that they have to hire veterans more
11 efficiently, more quickly.

12 What are some of the things that you can recommend, to
13 either this Committee or the Armed Services Committee, that
14 we can make improvements on that? I am assuming you all
15 support what the President did with his Executive order in
16 the last couple of days with regard to the maritime
17 industry, but what more can we do, because I think we can be
18 doing a lot better in this area, and your organization is
19 the perfect one to provide us recommendations for that.

20 Mr. Lawrence. Three of the key points that we look at
21 in that area, one is reopen transition assistance in the
22 community program for veterans, so recently discharged
23 veterans can revisit those TAP classes.

24 Senator Sullivan. Right now they do not have the
25 opportunity to go back on base and do that?

1 Mr. Lawrence. Correct.

2 Senator Sullivan. Okay.

3 Mr. Lawrence. Provide grants. We can provide grants
4 for organizations that connect recently transitioned
5 veterans with meaningful jobs, and conduct oversight to
6 ensure that DoD is doing its job to help these
7 servicemembers prepare for life after they get out of the
8 military.

9 Senator Sullivan. And you think the TAP program at
10 most bases is efficient or it is just kind of a check-the-
11 box thing that members want to get through and then move on?

12 Mr. Lawrence. Well, I think that in a lot of cases we-
13 -I just recently returned from Europe, visiting some of our
14 troops there, and I think awareness of what those classes
15 actually have to offer. And I do not know if the answer is
16 to provide more outreach to them, to let them know, you
17 know, this is important and this is what you have available
18 to you to make that transition.

19 Senator Sullivan. Well, we want to work with you on
20 that. I will tell you one other area that I think is
21 exciting. A lot of the unions, like in Alaska, a lot of the
22 building trades, you know, the operators, the laborers,
23 steelworkers, these are all organizations that have a lot of
24 vets. They want to bring our vets in quickly, because they
25 are such good workers. So we look forward to working with

1 you on that issue. It is an important issue. We are making
2 some progress but I think we can do better.

3 So thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator. Senator Tillis.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Tillis. Well, as a Senator from one of the
7 states that was a part of the original colonies I am glad
8 that we did the hard work to lay the groundwork for Alaska
9 to become a state. This whole banter back and forth between
10 my buddy, Senator Sullivan, and I came from a discussion
11 where--Senator Sullivan is a fierce advocate for Alaska.
12 That is why I like him so much. But he made a comment that
13 he has a higher population per capita of veterans than any
14 other state in the nation.

15 Senator Sullivan. That is true.

16 Senator Tillis. And I told Dan, I have got more
17 veterans than you have got people--

18 [Laughter.]

19 Senator Tillis. --which is also true.

20 Senator Sullivan. That is true too.

21 Senator Tillis. But the reason I say that, on the one
22 hand it is just fun to banter between two buddies, but on
23 the other hand it also demonstrates the diverse nature of
24 the challenge that we have. You know, a state like North
25 Carolina, that you rightfully tell me is several times

1 smaller than Alaska, with these number of veterans in urban
2 centers, different provider networks, have very different
3 approaches to providing quality care and access than Alaska.

4 And so we have to, as we implement the Mission Act and
5 as we implement tweaks to it, we need to make sure that we
6 do not come across with this concept that it is a one-size-
7 fits-all approach.

8 We also need to make sure that we are doing a better
9 job of working with the states to overcome some of the
10 hurdles that are, in part, limits of state policy on health
11 care--telemedicine across state lines, those sorts of
12 things, where we have got to provide an incentive for the
13 states to get engaged to provide a better standard of care.
14 There is no reason, if someone in Alaska needs help and it
15 is a service that can be provided through telemedicine, let
16 us just find a professional somewhere in this great country
17 that can provide on that telemedicine.

18 So we need to just continue to hone and provide, I
19 think, some reasonable solutions to some kinks that we are
20 going to have in the Mission Act.

21 One other thing I will tell you, in terms of attracting
22 talent to the VA, is we need to make sure we send a very
23 clear message that we have got some kinks to work out but it
24 is a good system. The brick-and-mortar presence is
25 critically important. I do not believe there is anybody in

1 Congress who seriously thinks that we should just completely
2 privatize and leave for the private sector to serve our
3 veterans. It would be wrong because you would be walking
4 away from an extraordinary health care and an institution
5 that is dedicated to veterans.

6 So what we need to do is make sure that while we
7 rightfully point to think that need to get better we also
8 point out there is a lot of hard-working people in these VA
9 health care facilities. About half of them are veterans
10 themselves. They care about the care that they are giving
11 to people, and it is an honorable profession, that we just
12 need more people. We need more doctors, more nurses, more
13 therapists, more people coming into these facilities so that
14 we can eliminate the wait times and all the other
15 challenges.

16 In my remaining time, Commander, I happen to have the
17 privilege of being on the Veterans' Committee but I am also
18 the Chair of the Personnel Subcommittee in Senate Armed
19 Services, so TAP is right in my lane. And I think the one
20 thing that we are going to do--I have spoken with the
21 Committee staff--is that we really do need the veterans'
22 perspective on how better to prepare someone to transition
23 to veteran status.

24 And I do believe that in some cases it is a check-the-
25 box, and in some cases it is a one-size-fits-all. You know,

1 somebody as old as him going through TAP is going to have a
2 different set of needs than some 20-year old. So we have
3 got to figure out how to tailor and identify ways that we
4 are really beginning to focus on the likely challenges and
5 opportunities someone is going to have, based on the skills
6 that they have gained while they served and the challenges
7 that they are going to have when they ultimately transition
8 into veteran status.

9 So we need a lot of feedback on how to do that better,
10 particularly going into the NDAA and going into this
11 Congress, suggestions that you all could provide us would be
12 very helpful, suggestions that you can provide us for
13 employment, which again, in many instances, is going to be
14 taking some of the skills that someone has gained, either in
15 active duty, Reserves, National Guard--and I guess in the
16 case of Reserves and National Guard they have occupations--
17 but others may be able to take skills that they have learned
18 while they are serving that should translate into
19 certifications and jobs that right now are a little bit
20 difficult.

21 Again, most of those are the purview of the state. We
22 can provide some incentive for states to enter compacts so
23 that it is easier for someone with medical experience to
24 move into a nursing field or CDL driver's license or any
25 number of skill sets that they are prepared for in their

1 service and that we should find a way to get them employed
2 and make them productive in their post-service life.

3 So I am here to thank you all and I am also here,
4 Ranking Member and Chairman, I would like to make one
5 suggestion. I do not know if they are here, but this
6 morning when I was walking in it was cold, and I happened to
7 see two gentlemen waiting in line. I went up and said, "You
8 here for the hearing?" "Yes." "You a veteran?" "Yeah."
9 "You cold?" "Yeah." "Do you want to skip line?" "Yeah."
10 So I brought them in.

11 [Laughter.]

12 Senator Tillis. If we are going to continue--and there
13 they are. So, you know, I think a week ago I probably had
14 about 40 come through because they happened to be all in
15 line at the same time. I would urge, if we are going to
16 continue to have these hearings during cold weather months
17 or inclement weather, that we try to figure out a rally
18 point with your home states or with other members so that we
19 can figure out how to get these people through, because I do
20 not think these folks should have to wait in line. Thank
21 you.

22 [Applause.]

23 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator Tillis, and I
24 agree, although when I came walking up this morning all the
25 folks from Montana had their coats off because it is so damn

1 warm here.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Senator Tillis. Tell me about it.

4 Senator Tester. Look, being the last one and
5 everything has been said but not everybody said it, so it is
6 my turn. I just want to thank you for being here, Commander
7 Lawrence. I also want to echo what was said earlier about
8 Bob and Carlos. They are top-flight guys. They do a great
9 job for the VFW here in Washington, D.C., making sure that
10 you guys' voices are being heard.

11 I also want to thank you, Commander, for what you are
12 doing to destigmatize mental health. This is a huge issue
13 in this country. It has already been pointed out, it is
14 both in the civilian sector and with our veterans. The key
15 is that the VA is going to be the one that figures out the
16 solution. And with your help and with our help and
17 everybody else, I think it requires a team of folks to get
18 their arms around this.

19 But I want to thank you for your leadership on this
20 issue. It is an important one. It is one we have got to
21 get our arms around, because it ain't getting any better.

22 And then I just want to--and there are some folks from
23 Montana here and I want to describe a situation because they
24 will back me up on this, where you go to the VA and you go
25 get an appointment, and say you have got a shoulder problem

1 and they do not have the kind of person they need. They
2 ship you into the private sector. That is what the Mission
3 Act is for.

4 What is happening in Montana right now, because we do
5 not have our physicians filled, is a veteran will call in
6 and before they even schedule them for the VA they pump them
7 into the private sector. Nobody up here wants privatization
8 but that is de facto privatization. We cannot allow that to
9 happen. The VA is the largest health care system in this
10 country. The folks I talk to that are veterans want that VA
11 there. It is there.

12 I have said this before. We can outsource the service
13 but cannot outsource the responsibility. So I appreciate,
14 in your testimony, talking about exactly that, Commander.

15 I have a couple of questions here, and that is, do you
16 believe that your members prefer health care from the VA?

17 Mr. Lawrence. Yes, sir, I do.

18 Senator Tester. Okay. Do you believe that community
19 providers should be held to the same standard as the VA
20 providers?

21 Mr. Lawrence. Yes, sir, I do.

22 Senator Tester. So would the VA support an expansion
23 of care into the community or more convenient access if it
24 meant reduction in quality or timeliness?

25 Mr. Lawrence. There should never be a reduction in

1 quality or timeliness when it comes to serving our nation's
2 veterans.

3 Senator Tester. Amen, brother.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Tester. And does the VA actively engage the
6 VFW in its process for developing market area assessments
7 and strategic plans?

8 Mr. Lawrence. No, they do not, and that is where they
9 are missing the boat.

10 Senator Tester. Okay. And so--

11 [Applause.]

12 Senator Tester. Right on. And so I think you have
13 already said this but I want to repeat it. The
14 organization--was your organization consulted on the VA's
15 development of proposed wait time and drive time standards?

16 Mr. Lawrence. No, sir, they were not.

17 Senator Tester. Okay. And if you would have been
18 consulted, would you have had input?

19 Mr. Lawrence. We would have a whole lot of input.

20 [Laughter.]

21 [Applause.]

22 Senator Tester. Well, look, they are probably not here
23 although there might be some from the VA here, but I
24 guarantee you they are watching it on TV. And I will tell
25 you that I have a tremendous amount of respect for Secretary

1 Wilkie and I do, and I do not know why, but we have had the
2 conversation before, that if he wants to be successful--and
3 I want him to be successful--we need good leadership at the
4 VA. If we are going to have good leadership at our VISNs
5 and different VAs around this country he has got to take
6 input from the VSOs. You guys are on the ground. We have
7 to take input from the VSOs as we are making policy that
8 affects you.

9 God bless every one of you and thank you for being
10 here.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Takano. The proceedings are adjourned.

13 [Whereupon, at 12:11 p.m., the Committees were
14 adjourned.]

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